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Conflict Resolution Systems in Wulí' Culture Donga-Mantung Division, Northwest Region

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This article concerns the Mfumte language, spoken in Donga-Mantung Division, in the North West Region of Cameroon

ISO 639-3: nfu

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1 INTRODUCTION

The entirety of the following research was carried out in the village of Lus in the Nwa sub-division of the Donga-Mantung division of the Northwest Region of Cameroon. Though the research officially began January 2012 (n° 000016/MINRESI/B00/C00/C10/C12), it effectively started the day we moved to Lus at the end of May 2011. Pastor NWUFA William was research assistant, being both a native of Lus and also having received some training in cultural anthropology. I, Nathan Michael of SIL Cameroon, was the primary researcher. All writing in the local language follow the orthography laid out in the *Mfumte Orthography Guide* by Julius EYOH and Robert Hedinger.

1.1 THE PEOPLE AND LANGUAGE

The village of Lus is located in the heart of what some call the Mfumte people. The name *Mfumte* was given to them by the neighboring Wimbun people and it means ‘people under the palms’. For anyone who has ever visited the area, the name will immediately seem fitting since palm trees are plentiful and the source of two important liquids; palm oil and palm wine.

There is a strong cultural identity between the 16 villages which comprise the area: Adere, Antere, Bang, Bitui, Inkiri, Jui, Koffa, Kom, Kwaja, Lus, Mbah, Mballa, Mbat, Mbibji, Manang, and Ncha.

The language ‘Mfumte’ is listed in the Ethnologue under the same name with the attached code of (ISO 639-3: nfu). This, however, does not include the villages of Kwaja, Bitui, Ncha and Adere. Three other languages are listed encompassing these otherwise ethnically Mfumte villages: Kwaja (ISO 639-3: kdz), Ndaktup (ISO 639-3: ncp) for Bitui and Ncha, and Dzodinka (ISO 639-3: add) for the village of Adere (Lewis 2009). A recent linguistic survey carried out by my colleague, Greg McLean, compared mutual intelligibility and linguistic relationship between the languages of Mfumte. The survey roughly states there are 4 distinct languages in the Mfumte area, including those on the Nigerian side of the River Donga. Though linguistically divided, ethnically, there is still a strong sense of common identity under the title of the Mfumte people. In the *Atlas Linguistique du Cameroun* (ALCAM) there are two languages listed for the area; Mfumte (905) and Dzodinka (904) (Dieu and Renaud 1983).²

In addition to the overall cultural identity of ‘Mfumte’, each village identifies itself as autonomous at some level or another. For example, if you are from Lus you are *wuli’*. This is why I have given the title ‘Conflict Resolution Systems in Wuli’ Culture’. For though the people possess the identity of ‘Mfumte’, more specifically the people of Lus are ‘Wuli’’. Within Lus, the village where I conducted research, there are 10 quarters. The 10 quarters are divided five and five by a river which runs between them thereby giving a slight social division between the two clusters.³ The first and most populous cluster of quarters is comprised of Lasi, Nhwibe, Oki, Usa and Uya. The second cluster includes Manko, Mashie, Mashiemfe, Mmalla, and Ngulu. I reside in the Lasi quarter and therefore it is from this side of the river where most of the informal

other village in the Mfumte area. Beyond this, the linguistic intelligibility between the two is at the 97th percentile. (McLean 19)

² These two classifications clearly do not include the Nigerian villages of Antere and Inkiri since the *Atlas* is for the nation of Cameroon only.

³ If you are on one side of the river, you can easily denote the other half of the quarters by waving a hand in their general direction and saying something like ‘that side of the river.’

observation came, though care was taken to discuss and interview those from ‘that side of the river’.

1.2 PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED RESEARCH

The most comprehensive research conducted on the Mfumte people was carried out by Vivianne Baeke and published in her work *Le Temps des Rites* in 2004. Also in the field of anthropology, the work *Food Production and Marketing in Lus* was written by Greg McLean in 2009. In the field of linguistics, two works were written in 2008, by EYOH Julius: *Mfumte Orthography Guide* and *Mfumte Phonology and Revitalization of the Language*, the latter being co-written by Robert Hedinger of SIL. There have also been two linguistic surveys, both conducted by SIL, in the Mfumte area. The first, *A Rapid Appraisal Survey of Dzodinka and Mfumte*, coming in 1994 and being conducted by Caroline Grant and colleagues, the second, *A Recorded Text Survey of the Mfumte Speech Varieties and Rapid Appraisal Survey of Adere*, published in 2012 by Greg McLean.

1.3 RATIONALE FOR RESEARCHING CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Conflict is a fact of life. No matter what country a person lives in or which language a person speaks, they will encounter conflict wherever they go. Africa and, more specifically, Lus are no different. The difference is what the sources of conflict are and how it is resolved. In recent years, there has been a search for new ways to address conflict in Africa. Clearly the history of Western intervention and imposition, whether political or military, is not having the lasting effect that many in the Western world would desire. The search for a solution to conflict in Africa is being turned inward. Some individuals, including Adegoju, Kipsisey and Ngwane,

advocate a more ‘indigenous’ solution to the problem by researching how African cultures traditionally address conflict within themselves.

In his article *Rhetoric in Conflict-Related Yoruba Proverbs: Guide to Constructive Conflict Resolution in Africa*, ADEGOJU Adeyemi turned to the proverbs of the Yoruba people to learn not only how to address conflict, but also to make a survey of their entire worldview concerning conflict as related through their proverbs. Another example is the article written by G.C. Kipsisey concerning conflict resolution in the Sabaot peoples of East Africa. Therein, he tries to provide an analysis of a local resolution system and how it may aid in stability at the national level. Beyond this, there have been other books written including one by Cameroon’s own NGWANE George, *Settling Disputes in Africa: Traditional Bases for Conflict Resolution*.

In addition to traditional conflict resolution structures, there are two non-native systems which have implanted themselves in Lus culture. The first is at the governmental level. This includes the police and any matter which is now brought to or decided by the government in Nwa or by their local representatives. The second is the various Christian churches found within the borders of Lus. Depending on how you define a church, there are a possible 14 churches represented across 6 different denominations: Baptist, Presbyterian, Catholic, Deeper Life, Christian Missionary Fellowship International (CMFI) and Charisma Chapel. Much of what I was able to observe and learn concerning these two non-native systems came about while researching the traditional system, except for the informal interviews I was able to conduct with local church pastors. These two foreign systems possess varying influence over the general populace. They serve as glaring examples of the expanding multiculturalism and globalization taking place even in this small hamlet tucked away in the remote hills of the Northwest of Cameroon.

2 HISTORY OF AREA AND BACKGROUND

Inhabitants of Lus state the founders of the village came across from what is now Nigeria and settled first in the quarter of Hwimbe, which is now one of the smallest of the 10 quarters.⁴ There was no Fon or chief at that time and as is stated in Vivianne Baeke's book *Le Temps des Rites*, the position of Fon was only instituted 6 Fons ago, during the time of colonial occupation. (Baeke 108-110) So even though, there is currently a chief and, by implication, strong central leadership, this is not the case.⁵

As laid out in their paper entitled 'Ncane Social Structures', Richard and Katrina Boutwell reference Dr. Sherwood Lingenfelter and his structure of social environments. There are 5 social structures in which all societies can be classified. Likewise, there are two factors by which that concerns how highly collective relationships are valued and defined according to insider/outsider distinctions. Without enumerating all the social structures, there are two I will mention; the first corporate and the second collectivist. The former involves a culture where there is a strong sense of group identity superceding that of the individual and also a highly rigid separation of roles. The latter also has a strong sense of group identity over the individual, but instead of highly rigid division of power between the various roles, there is a broader shared responsibility and power across several individuals, groups or roles.⁶ (Boutwell 1-3) The effects of this reality will be addressed later in section 4.2.2.2.

⁴ Multiple inhabitants of the village testified to this history and there were none who dissented from such a view.

⁵ When compared to neighboring peoples, i.e. – Wimbun and Nso', Lus culture contains a much more flattened hierarchical structure. The Nso' especially possessing a very strong and long-standing fondom.

⁶ For a more in depth discussion and analysis of the various social structures in a Cameroonian context, please reference the Boutwell's report on Ncane social structures. They give much more attention to explaining the entire grid as laid out by Dr. Lingenfelter.

3 COLLECTION OF DATA

To identify how conflict arises and becomes resolved within a culture, an observation of everyday life needs to take place. Questions and questionnaires serve specific purposes, but only yield insight into one half of someone's culture, that part which individuals can communicate themselves, also referred to as explicit culture. The other half of culture which cannot be described by the individual, or tacit culture, is what we are able to gain access to by observation. (Spradley 7-8) Observations for this research came from traditional council meetings, recounted stories of conflict, informal personal observations and personal involvement. There was also a plethora of conversations. Many of them were used to follow-up or clarify things I heard or observed, yet others were informal interviews where I investigated individuals' personal experiences and opinions. Additionally, though their drawback was mentioned earlier, I did administer questionnaires, which yielded its own sort of benefit to the research.

3.1 TRADITIONAL COUNCIL

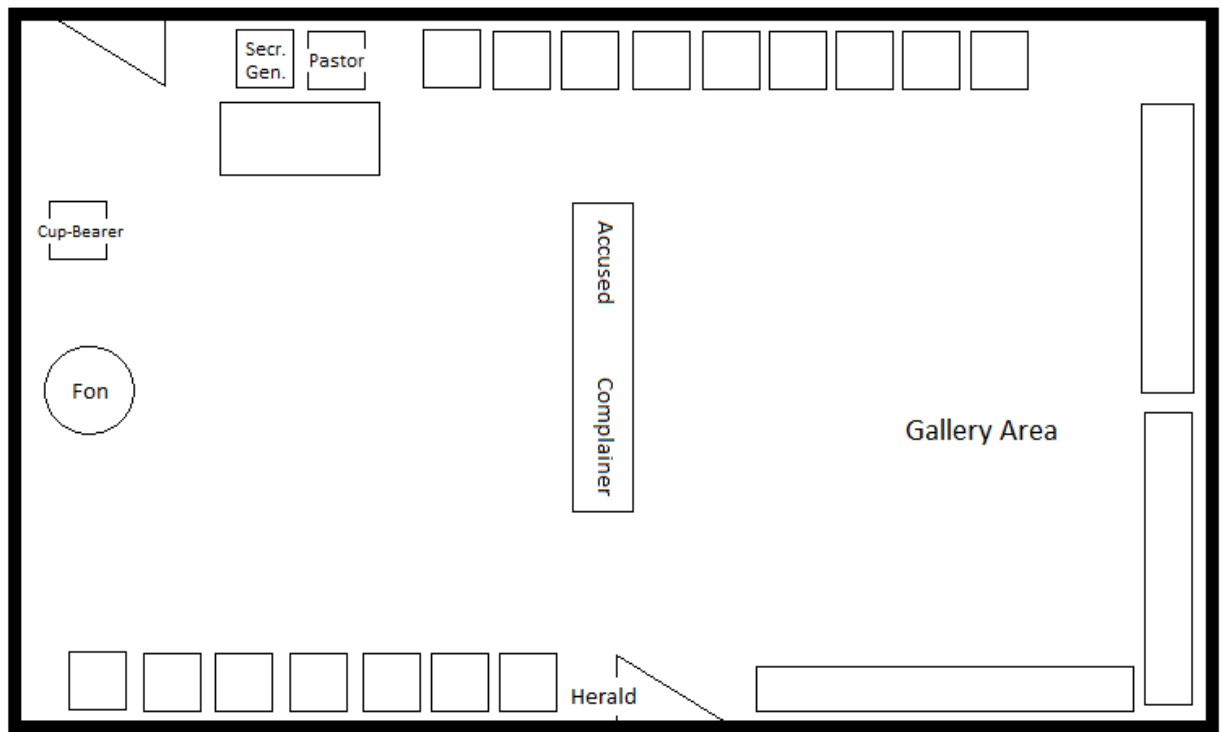
The bulk of time spent collecting data was through observation of the traditional council. What I term the traditional council is a weekly, sometimes twice a week, meeting to which cases were brought from the general populace to be considered by the village leaders. These leaders were comprised of the Fon, quarter heads⁷, Njis or family heads,⁸ and a few selected notables. Furthermore, attendance by these members is not required. So if a council member is out of town, busy or simply does not wish to attend, there is no penalty. Due to his travel schedule, the

⁷ Quarter heads, also known as sub-chiefs, are chosen within each quarter and represent the entire quarter at broader meetings or functions.

⁸ Family heads are not the patriarchs of immediate families, but rather extended families. I was able to observe a portion of one family meeting which involved around 20 or so males and at least as many females. Attendees were those living in the village or family members returning for a visit. Each quarter may have anywhere from 2-7 Njis with Uya and Usa quarters containing the most.

Fon is often absent from council meetings; a fact which does not disrupt proceedings since his presence is not mandatory.

The council was typically held Friday afternoons, with special sessions called for Wednesday afternoons, and lasted anywhere from 1 to 4 hours. The number of cases heard each session was determined by the involved parties' presence, how many cases needed hearing and how quickly the council addressed these cases. It was held at the Fon's palace, a single-room hall located in Uya quarter. This hall is divided into 3 sections while council is in session. I have named them the 'council', the 'involved parties' and the 'gallery'. The 'involved parties' area consists of a bench placed in the middle of the palace hall upon which sit the complainer and the accused. The bench thereby acts as a rough boundary between the 'council' and the 'gallery'. In the council section, the Fon sits at the front while on the side walls sit the notables upon square stools, usually in reserved seats. To the Fon's left is located a table behind which are seated the secretary general and a pastor who serves as the honorary council chaplain. When present, the pastor opens each session with prayer. Immediately to the Fon's left is his cup-bearer or [tanto'] and standing by the door is his herald or messenger called the [dògarì]. He is responsible for calling the involved parties to enter the palace hall, maintaining order in the court and delivering court summons. Please reference the following map for more detail of the Fon's palace hall.



Map of Fon's Palace Hall

3.2 STORIES, OBSERVATION AND INVOLVEMENT

Often times, an interesting story or retelling of some happening around the village became a wealth of information about the most recent conflicts and how they were resolved.

Impromptu observation was another great way to see real-life conflict happening. Most often, it manifested itself by witnessing the affected parties talk through the situation and reach an amicable parting, although this wasn't always the case.

Finally, I myself was able to experience conflict with others. On rare occasions, I found myself personally involved in these conflicts. They were usually incited when someone found fault with how I was handling division of labor for the construction of our home or I their

conduct. Their displeasure would be brought to my attention, usually ending in an amicable parting. There were no serious disagreements in which I was involved.

3.3 CONVERSATIONS

Conversations concerning conflict and conflict resolution arose at any time. Often, it would not be the focus of the conversation, but rather an off-handed comment made by someone that caught my ear. I would then stop the conversation and ask about it, a luxury afforded to me courtesy of my cluelessness of the culture, or I made a mental note of the point and followed it up with a trusted friend. It became clear early on that it was best to seek multiple opinions on the matter since interpretations of a cultural act can differ from one person to the next or overlooked details may be added.

3.4 QUESTIONNAIRES

I began administering questionnaires to two different groups of people. The first group was family heads. This was done after I learned that many of the disputes I witnessed in the traditional council first came up through family meetings. It was only after these family meetings that the cases were passed on to the traditional council if a verdict could not be reached. The questions in the questionnaires were chosen for the purpose of learning what types of matters are heard by the family and how they were treated.

The second group was the general populace. I tried to sample a broad age range as well as opinions from several of the quarters. They were given a different set of questions than the Njis in the form of hypothetical situations. An example would be, 'What would you do if someone stole your goat?' or 'What would you do if someone put a curse on you?' The answers I received spanned a wide range and most of the participants thought it was interesting that I would ask

such questions. Though there were variations in the answers, a clear ‘correct’ answer emerged in most situations.

The questionnaires’ effectiveness at determining real-life reactions was slightly questionable, but it was here where I first saw the mingling of various conflict resolution systems, i.e – governmental, Christian and traditional. Despite having an idea of the theoretically ‘correct’ cultural answer, I would often hear someone utter a very non-traditional answer such as, ‘I would take them to the gendarmes’ or ‘I would bring them before the church.’

After getting a general idea as to what the typical answer to a question might be, I discontinued further questionnaires with the realization that my efforts would be better used elsewhere since the tacit culture was not being observed, but rather explicit culture explained. To reference the two questionnaires used, please refer to Appendix A I have also written in the most common answers given to each question and some not-so-common answers in the footnotes.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 TYPES OF CONFLICT

Conflict in Lus culture can arise over anything, even something as small as not being greeted, but for our purposes, we will limit the scope of what may cause conflict to a few key areas. I have found there are five of these key areas in which conflict may arise in Lus culture: land disputes, property rights, marriage/dowry payment, conflicts concerning ancestral spirits and conflicts concerning money.

4.1.1 Land Disputes

Land disputes are almost entirely relegated to the traditional court. The gendarmes and divisional government rarely become involved simply because they do not have the historical knowledge of boundary lines to properly address the matter. This knowledge is necessary because the lands around Lus have been passed down through families for generations; sometimes being sold to non-family members and at other times disputed, resolved and then disputed again by descendants within an extended family. Without knowledge of such complex dealings, an improper judgment would be passed. Matters are further complicated due to the fact that one can own the land, but not own the rights to perhaps the palms on the land. They are not necessarily included with the sale of the land. A personal example is when I negotiated with a family for the land on which we built our house. We reached an agreement concerning the land, but the palms (and pineapple plants) were paid for separately. This matter will be further addressed in property rights.

The impetus for a land dispute is usually when someone wants to use the land or gain from it in some way. Rarely are land boundaries investigated unless there is a purpose for it, this includes intentions to farm land previously left fallow. The parties involved in these land disputes can be individuals, families or entire quarters.

4.1.2 Property Rights

This may include any possession, living or not, which someone may own. This can range from someone's house, goat, corn or palms. I have found individuals were more patient concerning property violations as opposed to land disputes. If someone loaned an item to someone else and, after a time, desired the item back, the person who loaned the item would wait patiently for it to be returned. This may be done without raising too much fuss for quite a while,

sometimes months, without appealing to outside help in reacquiring the item. People are often willing to extend patience to others, even when an item is taken without the owner's previous consent or knowledge. A concrete example is if someone's goat is missing. The goat owner may look for the goat, also asking others to notify him if the goat is spotted. If the owner of the goat finds that someone has the goat, he will simply ask for the goat back. If the person returns the goat, there is no harm done. The owner will not seek retribution for the time period where the goat was missing. In fact, in one instance, I heard of a man simply taking another man's radio in lieu of payment he felt was owed to him. When the original owner of the radio found it was in the second man's possession, they were able to dialogue not only about the radio, but also the previous debt; reaching resolution on both accounts. Therefore, taking one's property may serve as a way to get another's attention as well as compensation for a previous debt.

4.1.3 Marriage or Dowry Payment

Though these could be considered two separate matters, the lines between them are often blurred. The bride price or dowry is a standard point of contention, with an almost expected follow-up effort on behalf of the bride's family to receive what has been promised by the groom before marriage. Often, these types of problems never reach any court higher than the family council, but on occasion, something arises which cannot be resolved and needs the intervention of the traditional council.

The cases which require the most intervention usually involve quite a bit more than a groom not meeting his end of the bargain. One court case brought before the council was due to the fact that the groom had paid part of the bride price, worked for his in-laws, then left for an extended period of time. Upon his return, he found his fiancée was betrothed to another man and pregnant with this second man's child. It further complicated the matter when the first man still

desired to marry her and was willing to take on the child as his own. The court later found in favor of the first man, but did not order the woman to marry him. Rather, the family, primarily the mother-in-law, was required to pay back to the young man what he had paid in bride price up to that point.

Other cases become muddled for other reasons. Often conflicting stories are brought to the council. Or, as in one case, the husband had never taken full responsibility for a child his wife previously bore to another man, but then later collected on that child's bride price. In each case, the council listens to all sides of the story, asks questions about the situation and answers given and then rules as they see fit or in accordance with traditional belief.

4.1.4 Concerning Ancestral Spirits

In Lus cultural belief, the ancestral spirits of the family can be called upon in order to, among other things, inflict someone with illness and even death if that person has committed a wrong against the family or individual. Therefore, everyone has their ancestral spirits at their disposal to bring judgment on another person, but only when deemed appropriate. When administering the questionnaires, I asked what one might do if they had ancestral spirits called against them. Nearly everyone responded that they would make amends for the wrong they had committed. Therefore, it was clear to everyone in the culture that ancestral spirits are not called upon haphazardly or without just cause, but due to a wrong committed.⁹ The citizens of Lus understand they are likely culpable if the ancestral spirits afflict them in some way. This is a highly effective means of conflict resolution within Lus culture. An individual may not admit

⁹ The most interesting response to this question came from one older man who emphatically replied, 'I would call my ancestral spirits right back on him.' He explained that to have the traditional council force the ancestral spirits to be removed, the afflicted party would have to pay a chicken to the council. By calling his own against the man, he therefore ensured he would not be the only one paying a chicken.

guilt when ancestral spirits are initially called against them, but if they then become sick, even slightly, they are likely to confess their wrongs, real or imaginary.

The one case brought before the traditional council concerning ancestral spirits involved a woman who caught and held a man's goat for destroying her crops. Since she would not relinquish the goat without compensation, he called his ancestral spirits to afflict her. When she fell ill and feared death, she begged the traditional council to force the man to remove the ancestral spirits. The man replied matter-of-factly that he did not wish to save her and wished her dead. In order to motivate the man to comply, the traditional council stated that unless he make a libation to the spirits in order to save the woman, they would refuse any cases in the future which the man might bring to them. This was sufficient motivation for him to pay for the libation to be made.¹⁰

In a later section, I will address ancestral spirits as a means of addressing and resolving conflict, but in this section I wish to draw attention to their causing conflict. In the aforementioned case, the woman was not bringing the original cause of conflict, i.e.- the goat eating her crops, to the attention of the council, but rather her afflicted state of health brought on by the man's ancestral spirits. Therefore, ancestral spirits are both a cause and solution to conflict.

4.1.5 Concerning Money

This is a broad category, but one which is increasingly handed over to the gendarmes, no matter what the situation. To clarify, this is usually when money is missing or taken. One man lost his money pouch on the side of the road and when he found it again the money was missing. Instead of reporting to the traditional council, he brought the matter to the gendarmes, even

¹⁰ The woman has not died.

implicating a man when the evidence was circumstantial at best. Though a definite reason is unclear, two possible reasons emerge as to why these types of matters are brought to the gendarmes instead of through the traditional council. One possibility is because both an organized police force and currency are relatively recent, foreign additions to Lus society. Therefore the governing of the latter belongs in hands of the former. Another possibility is that money may not be 'governed' by the ancestral spirits per se, or at least they never did in the past. No matter what the reason, this is where unspoken jurisdiction concerning money matters lies.

4.2 AVENUES BY WHICH CONFLICT IS ADDRESSED

This section will address the various systems within the society which have been established, whether internally or externally, to address conflict. Some have originated from within and others have been forced on the people of Lus, eventually becoming integrated to one degree or another, by at least a portion of the society. I purposely did not entitle the section 'Avenues by which Conflict is *Resolved*' for the sole reason that conflict is not always resolved through these avenues. At times it is simply a tenuous stalemate or postponement of the conflict, possibly to be revived a generation or two later. This is not an indictment against these avenues, but rather a realistic understanding that resolution must be reached between the parties involved and not forced upon them by external constructs. No matter how sophisticated or efficacious the resolution system, true resolution involves the willful choice of the offended parties to resolve the matter between themselves, no matter the external penalties or rewards put in place to motivate such an outcome.

That being said, every culture has some avenue to address conflict within itself. Lus society is no different. I have found four: Interpersonally, traditional methods, the church, and the gendarmes and/or government.

4.2.1 *Interpersonally*

This is by far the most important and primary means. If individuals of a society cannot address even menial conflicts between themselves without the intervention of third parties, I am convinced that no manner of formal methods will intervene successfully.

Throughout the research, it became evident that communication, whether verbal or non-verbal, is integral to addressing such daily conflicts arising between individuals. Often times, the non-verbal is as effective at breaching the subject of offense as the verbal. One way to demonstrate to someone your feelings is to avoid or refuse greeting them in public. This is a fairly serious measure to take, signifying a major break in relations, but very effective to bring about a confrontation. This is not without its drawbacks. The public snubbing can exacerbate the situation by offending the person it intended to draw into dialogue, thereby leading to cyclical feelings of anger or frustration. One man, describing his strained relationship with a friend, stated the seriousness of the situation by saying, 'He is not even greeting me!'

For the verbal expression of broken relations, a simple protocol of bringing up the problem and airing your grievances directly to the other person is acceptable, though this requires an intimate relationship to begin with. Otherwise, it is entirely acceptable to enlist the aid of a friend as a go-between. This role should be played by someone who knows and, if possible, is friends with both sides of the conflict. By enlisting this kind of help, it serves two purposes. The go-between is more able to transmit and receive messages without emotion clouding expression and reception. This leads to a softer message and less fuel for escalation. Also, if a go-between is chosen wisely, he may be able to change or add to the messages being sent and received in such a way which aids in the reconciliation process.

Often times, it is easy to overlook interpersonal conflict resolution since it is so common across cultures. But, as previously stated, this may be the most important and effective means of conflict resolution and reconciliation that exists. Furthermore, this method is now being put into practice at the international stage. During the disputed elections in Cote d'Ivoire of 2011, an African delegation of intermediaries was sent to seek resolution between the two presidential hopefuls, Mr. Gbagbo and Mr. Ouatarara, after a disputed election and dual pronouncement of victory.¹¹

4.2.2 *Traditional Methods*

The title of this section is purposely worded to include more than simply the traditional council. Within the 'traditional methods', there are family meetings, traditional council, quarter councils, and traditional religion including spirits, witches and spells. The lines separating these methods are blurred at best, sometimes using all at the same time or several in succession. One case can begin in the family meeting, be sent to the quarter head for consideration, deemed too difficult to resolve, sent to the traditional council and then the verdict is sealed by swearing on a religious artifact or having a priest pour out a libation. The seamless integration of these various traditional methods testifies to their long-standing co-existence as opposed to the churches and governmental systems.

4.2.2.1 *Family Meetings*

The family meetings are held either weekly or bi-weekly and are used for more than simply conflict resolution. They are a time for the family to come together, discuss family issues, decide on matters concerning the family, address possible betrothals and forthcoming children and to resolve any conflicts within their ranks. The family is hierarchical in structure, with each

¹¹ Sadly, no resolution was reached and the stand-off between the two sides was ended by the intervention of a tactical squad physically removing Mr. Gbagbo from his residence.

male having decision making power with the Nji as the head. Following him are the eldest males and on down the line with each male knowing his position within the family. I was able to attend part of a family meeting where they introduced all the members and their number in the hierarchy. At one point a man was introduced with the incorrect ranking and was quickly set straight by several family members. Status within the family is something of great importance. In section 3.4, I mentioned briefly administering questionnaires to several family heads. By their responses I was able to gain some insight into the process a conflict may go through to reach resolution.

First, if there is a conflict, the family member(s) affected will take it to their own father who will bring it before the family head. Then, if the matter can wait, it will be brought up at the next family meeting. It is there that an open discussion will commence, the final decision being passed by the highest ranking males. The women of the family may be present and even add pertinent information, especially the case for the elder women who possess more traditional knowledge, but when it comes to the point of decision, they are left out. This falls in line with what Baeke states about Lus' patrilineal culture. (62)

4.2.2.2 Traditional Council

Traditional council, introduced earlier in section 3.1, is usually the last form of addressing a conflict within Lus culture. Smaller courts exist at the quarter head level. Though it is also a traditional council' in the sense that they are councils and a traditional part of the culture, I will henceforth refer to them as quarter councils so as to avoid any confusion with the higher, village-wide council. These work along the same lines as the traditional court and often function as a preliminary screening process, to solve the simpler matters at the local level before passing them up the ladder. Therefore, if a decision is made at the traditional court, it is final and

has no further appeal. The only addition to decisions already made by the council can be added by the Fon. For example, if the council decides that goats should be tied up throughout the village, the Fon can then add that if any goat is caught loose, it can be killed, brought to the palace, or dealt with in another manner. Most of the types of conflict listed in section 4.1 can be addressed in the traditional council, though problems concerning money are typically taken to gendarmes, as previously mentioned.

In my observation, cases can be brought directly to the council or come up through the various other 'courts' such as family meetings or the courts at the quarter level. Occasionally, a case will be brought to the gendarmes and then be asked to be released to the traditional courts. At this point, the Fon will have to intervene and have the case released to him and the traditional council. If done so, a nominal fee or "dash"¹² is required for the Fon's aid.

In section 2, the social structure of the society was addressed briefly by referencing Dr. Lingenfelter's societal constructs (Lingenfelter 23-25). For our purposes, I referenced two of the five possible societal constructs: 'corporate' and 'collectivist'. Though on the surface Lus culture exhibits a 'corporate' culture evidenced by a fon in a palace, at the level of traditional council and judging cases, the power and decision making is shared across all council members, which testifies to a more 'collectivist' social structure. This makes sense when one looks at the history of the leadership structure in Lus culture, i.e. - the colonial government requiring the village create the post of chief. (Baeke 105-113)¹³

¹² This is the Cameroon Pidgin word for gift, though it takes on many connotations, even signifying an obligatory payment for services rendered.

¹³ Informally and anonymously, a few citizens of Lus have related to me that there is still debate and buried opposing opinions concerning who should hold the position of Fon and from which quarter he should come. Furthermore, some quarters have felt their own prowess worthy of creating their own fondoms and effectively seceding into their own villages.

So, how does this manifest itself through conflict resolution and the traditional courts? One might expect the Fon to have a much stronger say than others, but often times, this isn't the case. Though, his words might carry more weight, as far as an individual's words and opinions may go, often the actual decision is made by several council members being sent out of the palace for deliberation. Those members, as a unit, pass the judgment which then becomes the overall decision of the council. These decisions are final and have no further appeal. To add weight to these decisions, an affirmation of the decision is often confirmed by the involved parties by means of traditional religion. I witnessed one such confirmation. At the end of a case concerning a disputed bride and bride-price, the mother-in-law of the bride was required to return the portion of the dowry already paid to the former groom. To ensure she would not later take retribution against him for bringing the case against her and accepting the returned money, they brought a metal gong or cow bell, otherwise used at a ritual shrine site for religious ceremonies, into the council¹⁴. To finalize the matter, each party had to swear they no longer bore any ill will towards the other and then licked the gong with their tongues. By doing so, they brought a spell on themselves which would afflict them with a physical malady if they were lying or ever attempt to repay evil to the other for the verdict given.

4.2.2.3 *Traditional Religion*¹⁵

As previously stated and demonstrated by the above example, the integration of various traditional means of conflict resolution is commonplace in Lus culture. The sub-category of

¹⁴ The gong was handled primarily by a council member who was a priest in the traditional religion. He was charged with taking the gong back to the shrine site after its served purpose. The Fon never touched it since he has no authority in traditional spiritual matters.

¹⁵ For an extensive look at the traditional religious environment of Lus and other Mfumte villages, please reference Vivianne Baeke's book *Le Temps des Rites*. She has valued first-hand knowledge of rituals, societies and handlings of traditional matters which I have had neither time nor the opportunity to pursue or investigate. I would consider this the seminal work on traditional religion within Mfumte cultures. People within Lus still talk about Ms. Baeke and her time with them.

traditional religion includes any number of components including spells, witches and ancestral spirits.

One common source of conflict which is resolved through traditional religion is boundary disputes. These can go through the traditional court or bypass it entirely as is evidence by the following example.

There was a boundary dispute between the quarters of Oki and Lasi. Instead of bringing the case before the council, it was solved in another very traditional manner. Rather than call on surveyors as we might in the Western world, some traditional ‘medicine’, effectively a spell, was placed on a banana or plantain plant, which was then planted along the disputed boundary. Normally, the plant is left to mature and bear its fruit. Then, when ready to eat, the two sides come back together and feed the fruit to their children with the understanding that the dishonest party’s child or children will become ill and possibly die. Often times, and as was the case here, one party bows out of the disagreement before reaching the final stage as to avoid bringing sickness or death on their descendants. If followed to its completion, each side is showing they are willing to risk the life of their child or children to be vindicated in their claim.¹⁶

Often, physical events testify to a spiritual conflict in Lus society. When someone falls ill, it is not uncommon to hear a family member shout, ‘Someone has put a curse on her!’ I saw this play out as a husband was trying to get his ailing wife into a taxi to be driven to medical care, the mother was shouting behind him about someone causing the sickness through divination or witchcraft and that a witch or Juju needed to be consulted. It was a blatant example of the now commonplace clash between traditional and modern reasoning. I reference this

¹⁶ Oki was the quarter to bow out of the dispute. Furthermore, an Nji from another quarter gave a lengthy speech stating that it was clear who was in the right if you knew anything about the old boundary lines, which he did.

example, though it might not appear a conflict event, because conflict does not simply occur in the physical world, but also the spiritual for the people of Lus. It is simply in the physical world where we see the effects of that spiritual conflict.

Another example of the spiritual conflict played out in the physical is a ritual practiced in some family meetings. In this case, a young girl in the family may be trying to conceive, but is unable to, or has conceived before, but continues to miscarry. The family will then come together and reason that it may be caused by ill-will originating from another family member. In order to remove the barrenness of the girl, they will all sit together in the family meeting and pass around a calabash containing some water and a special leaf. As the calabash passes from one individual to the next, they take turns speaking into the gourd any grievances they may have towards the girl, doing this in the midst of the rest of the family, and then finalizing their turn by declaring they want peace for that girl. Upon completion of this ceremony, any opposition to fertility originating from the family will be removed. Therefore in Lus society, there are social constructs to address conflict, both spiritual and physical.

Ancestral spirits function not only as the impetus for conflict, but also as the means to resolution. As stated before, the physical and the spiritual or, in this case, the immaterial are often intermingled, contrary to how religion and law or religion and science are deemed to be separate in the Western world. I witnessed one family's communal land sold unilaterally by an elder member of the family. This was in direct violation of 'normal operating procedure' for the sale of family land. When I asked a younger family member what the family as a whole did, he said they did nothing, but that their ancestors would know what to do. This implied that if this

elder who sold the land had acted improperly, the living members would not have to do anything to him, but simply wait and see how the ancestors may punish him.¹⁷

The idea of ancestors enacting the punishment or judging an individual is a strong motivating factor when people are challenged on a wrong they have committed. As stated earlier, if someone becomes sick after ancestral spirits have been invoked, they will quickly seek to make amends for their actions.

4.2.3 *The Church*

This avenue towards conflict resolution was a later addition to the research. It was brought on by reading *Conflict Resolution in the Kemezung Community* by Christopher Smoes. Therein, he interviews many members of the community, focusing especially on church communities being integrated into this resolution process. After looking at my own context, it became clear that the churches are a major component towards conflict resolution in Lus society. These, like the government, are modern components of the conflict resolution process, sometimes overshadowing and sometimes functioning in neutrality towards the traditional methods, but only occasionally cooperating.¹⁸

The means of conflict resolution inside churches rests primarily on the church pastors through conversation between the involved parties. In this way, the pastors function primarily as intermediaries, counselors and impartial third parties in order to facilitate reconciliation or, at the very least, tentative cease-fires. The only time ‘church discipline’ is invoked is when there is a moral lapse in the life of a professed church member. An example is when a man in the church

¹⁷ Interestingly, this man was a pastor of a local church. It is not uncommon to hear a villager reference God as their judge or that he will decide for them amidst a conflict, but in this case, a leader of a church, was willfully invoking not God above, but his ancestors as the judge.

¹⁸ The one exception stated earlier is the transferring of cases from the gendarmes to the traditional council.

exhibited severe anger and physical aggression towards another individual within the community, inflicting physical harm upon the man. Though there was more to it, the most public form of his punishment was through a public apology to the church body and removal, for a time, from his role as teacher.

The churches are often used as avenues to address interpersonal conflict. If the parties believe the pastor or other church leader can function as a neutral third party, they may bring their conflict to him, trusting his wisdom and judgment to lead to resolution. One such instance involved a stalemate between friends concerning responsibility over a property. It was brought to the attention of a pastor who, besides being a respected individual of the local church, had also witnessed both sides of the disagreement. This role of intermediary was therefore entrusted to him due, in part, to his position within the church and community.

4.2.4 Gendarmes or the Government

Though this means of addressing conflict was not a main focus of research, it has become such a staple in Lus society that it deserves mentioning. As stated, money matters are typically brought to the gendarmes and kept out of the council. There have also been cases of violence and those involving foreigners brought to the gendarmes. In spite of the gendarmes' permanent fixture within Lus, the institution of the gendarmes is held at arm's length by the residents. It co-exists with the traditional methods, rarely in collaboration.

The government is regularly involved in one other type of conflict, namely agricultural. I say regularly, not always. Typically, when crops are destroyed by a citizen of Lus, the matter is handled 'in house', by one of the methods mentioned earlier, but if it is a conflict arising

between a local and an outsider, the matter is often brought to an Agriculture technician for appraisal of the damage.

Most of these matters occur during the dry season each year when the Fulani bring their cattle down from the hills and into the valleys. It is here they find grasses for their cattle to graze on when those on the heights have withered. Undoubtedly, collateral damage to farms occurs and the citizen of Lus will look for compensation. Since the Fulani are outsiders and outsiders are not typically integrated into traditional methods of conflict resolution, the broader governmental system is involved. The event usually plays out as follows: destruction of crops, confronting the perpetrator, contacting the regional Agricultural technician, appraisal of the damage, and finally monetary restitution. It is a disputed fact whether full restitution is ever made. After such confrontation, villagers of Lus are often left only partially satisfied with the outcome of either the decision or receipt of payment.

In the sphere of agriculture, it seems an effective delineation of responsibility has been made between the traditional council and governmental involvement. By handling matters concerning locals within traditional confines and matters concerning outsiders by governmental means, the division of responsibilities is well-defined and symbiotic.

5 CONCLUSION

5.1 SUMMARY

Concerning Lus culture we have looked at the sources of conflict and the avenues within the society for addressing those conflicts. The main sources, though not limited to, are those concerning land disputes, property rights, marriage/dowry payment, ancestral spirits and money. I believe if we had a time machine to see what conflicts were customary 200 years ago, we might

see a similar list of sources, but a much shorter list of how those conflicts were resolved. As it is, we found four avenues to address conflict; two long-standing, the others recent and external. They are interpersonally, the traditional methods, the Christian churches and the government. It is safe to say that the latter will not depart any time soon, though there is a slow ebbing of influence of the former.

5.2 INSIGHTS AND OPINIONS

I believe I can make this last statement due to two trends I noticed during research. The first, likely a global trend found in many societies, is the waning belief by the younger generation in the things of the past, be they traditional ‘medicine’ or traditional values. This played itself out right before my eyes when a friend was recounting the resolution of the land dispute mentioned in section 4.2.2.3 between the quarters of Oki and Lasi. When my friend reached the part where they placed traditional ‘medicine’ on the plantain plant, a younger citizen of Lus who had been listening quietly, stated emphatically that it wasn’t real, it was just sorcery and witchcraft, thereby implying these things are just superstition. Granted there is never one opinion to represent an entire generation, however this is not the first or the last time I have seen a younger member of Lus society scoff or treat with mild disdain the traditional ways.

The second trend has played out in the very heart of traditional strongholds, the traditional council. The current Fon is young and has only been in his position for a couple of years. Possibly due to his youth, though the actual reason is unclear, his opinion is occasionally based on governmental law. Whenever this is the case, it inspires the ire and occasional boycott by various notables around the village. Their frustration stems from the fact that governmental law is superseding their traditional basis for judging a case. Also, most of the notables being older than the Fon, are more knowledgeable about the older ways of governing and resolving

cases and therefore can clearly see how the Fon is straying from decades of tradition and heritage.

In spite of the encroaching influences of churches and government, there are still many traditional means the Lus culture has preserved in order to address and resolve conflict. The traditional conflict resolution structure may be represented by concentric circles, the center being an interpersonal “court”. If the conflict remains unresolved, it will proceed to a family meeting, followed by courts at the quarter level and finally the traditional court. Therefore a conflict originates at the center with few people involved but gathers more participants as they pursue resolution. In this manner, it mirrors the advice given in Matthew 18 of the Bible. Therein it describes beginning conflict resolution by addressing the problem interpersonally with the involved parties and, if unresolved, to involve others to help confront the situation. Beyond these ‘courts’, there is always traditional religion, including the ancestral spirits. One need simply consult a witch or DjuDju to find out who has bewitched whom or why someone died.

In the years to come, the effects of globalization will become clearer and more pronounced. As younger individuals travel farther from the village with increasing frequency, I believe it is only a matter of time before the very existence of traditional conflict resolution systems reaches a crisis. Though this outlook is bleak, I believe it is based on the current trend mentioned earlier.

5.3 AREAS OF FURTHER RESEARCH

Contained within this research are many topics worthy of more in-depth examination. Solely from my notes on the traditional council, an individual paper may be gleaned. It stands to reason, therefore, that we have delved widely, covering many areas, but are lacking in depth in

all of them. Though time may never permit, family meetings and all their functions, not simply as a family court, would be an interesting area to observe, especially since it also functions as a savings bank, place of council and fellowship hall.

I am sure that hidden within Lus culture, there are many more practices and rituals which concern conflict resolution. The example referenced earlier of the passing of the calabash within family meetings was one upon which I simply stumbled while administering a questionnaire to an Nji. If not for happen stance, I would still not know of its existence to this day. That ritual cannot be the only hidden jewel amidst the rich culture of the Lus people. It will only be with time that more are revealed.

It is also clear that globalization and the collision of traditional with modern is an ever-changing and world-wide phenomenon worthy of academic observation. As telecommunications, media and wider travel spread in their usage, the old anthropology model of studying ‘pure’ or ‘primitive’ peoples untouched by the outside world will become increasingly more difficult to follow.¹⁹ This globalization will continue to produce new areas of study for cultural anthropologists for decades to come.

¹⁹ In our remote village, which is unknown to most inhabitants of the same region and lacks running water or electricity, there already exist cellular coverage, though spotty, and television reception, though only on special occasions such as national football matches. This was unheard of only a few short years ago.

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Appendix A

Name:

Which family:

Quarter:

- How often do you have to hold family council?

Family meetings are held usually once a week, but family councils, depending on the families can be held anywhere from 0-8 times a month.

- What kinds of cases are brought before the family council?

Boundary disputes, marriages, dowries, farm disputes, quarreling (even between husband and wife), and ancestral spirits.

- Who hears or is present at the family councils and who passes decision on the cases?

The elder males play the largest role, listening and giving opinions. The eldest member or the Nji pass judgment. Older women can give advice.

- What if the case is between 2 or 3 of the family leaders?

An elder outside the family, but still related will be brought in to reconcile the family leaders.

- What are some examples of cases the family has heard over the past several months?

Property dispute between brothers, pregnancy issues for a woman in the family, illness brought on by a woman quarreling with her husband, accepting a dowry in secret and not presenting it to the family.

- What are possible fines or punishments for offenders?

Chicken or palm wine

- What if the people involved in the case disagree with the decision? Do they appeal to someone else or to the family again?

When a judgment is passed, there is a general acceptance of the verdict. If someone disagrees openly with the verdict, they may cast him out of the family. One family head stated no individual can supersede the group. Another family head said that if someone was openly disagreeing with a verdict passed, someone may take a stone, hit the ground with it and say, ‘You will feel this, you will feel this.’

- How do you enforce the verdict?

If a fine is to be paid, the person is told that if they do not pay on time, their child or other family member will become sick or die.

- How does a family member bring a case to the family council?

It starts at the immediate family level, being brought to the father. Then that father will consult the family head to set a time and date for the family meeting.

What cases qualify to be heard by the family council?

If there is a case attested to be true, i.e. – not fabricated, the family will hear the case.

Name:

Age:

From which quarter:

What would you do if:

- You found goats eating your crops? Cows?

Goats: They would try to catch the goat. Then talk to the owner and demand compensation. If the owner of the goat refuses, then they will be brought before the traditional council. Two younger individuals spoke of bringing the person to an agricultural officer of the government.

Cows: This was understood to generally refer to Fulani cattlemen. Take to the traditional council or Agriculture office. There were two women who said they would even avoid the situation because the Fulani were difficult to deal with.

- Someone stole your goat? Jerry can? Corn? Cutlass?

If found and returned, there would be no further problem. If found and not returned, the person will be brought before the traditional council. If not found, there were generally two courses of action: The first, just leave the matter. The second, enlist a traditional herbalist to make an injunction against the thief. The 'medicine' will either bring the thief back or make them sick.

- Someone destroyed your crops? House?

If the person is unknown, most will drop the matter.²⁰ If the person is known, often they would simply want to know why. Then, the traditional council would be involved. One older woman would pray for God's vengeance on the person.

- Someone put a curse on you? Your family?

The person would be summoned to the council and an explanation demanded.²¹

²⁰ One older man said he would have the chief priest make a concoction that would suffocate the perpetrator no matter where they were.

- Someone calls the ancestral spirits against you? Your family?

If they were convinced they did nothing to deserve it, they would not react. If they got sick, they would take it to the council. If they deserved it, they would make amends as quickly as possible.

- Someone will not finish the work you hired them for?

Ask, ask, ask for them to finish the work. If still refusing, either take them to the council for either compensation or for requirement to finish the work. Otherwise they would drop the matter.

- Someone is not paying a dowry?

The standard reaction was to not worry about it and wait until their in-law had a daughter of their own. They would then collect the dowry on their grand-daughter. If the person who owed the dowry was dying, they would require that person write it in their will that it was still owed to them.

- Someone borrows money and won't pay back?

Ask, ask, ask. If the person refuses, they will either take it to the traditional council or to the gendarmes.

- Someone accuses you of something you did not do?

They would stand on their refusal and would not take any further action.²²

- Someone physically threatens you? Attacks you?

They generally took this as a robbery. All the women said they would hand over anything that was demanded, but the men said that in the house they would fight back. They said that it would be better to die than to lose the respect of their wives and be thought a coward.

²¹ One girl said she would take the person to the traditional court that he might 'sign her life'. It would function as a guarantee that she will not die.

²² Two younger individuals said they would take the person to the council for defamation of character.

- Someone insults you in private? In public?

When in private, the offense was pardonable, but when in public, it was almost unforgiveable. Most responses involved insulting them back, breaking friendship with them and/or fighting.

- Do you attend a church?

Everyone attended church and identified themselves as church members.